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1-18-09

## 1 Samuel 3:1-10

*May we be blessed with understanding in the reading of the Holy Scripture.*

I must admit to you all a rather foolish thought that I had yesterday. In fact this thought might reveal to you how little time I've actually lived in the Chicago area. I thought spring was on its way. I walked outside yesterday and about took my coat off I felt so warm. I haven't felt my fingers in at least a week and yesterday, yesterday they started to wiggle again. I've never been so happy to see temperatures in the mid twenties and I started thinking spring might come soon... I've since reconsidered, my optimism got the better of me, and my curiosity took me to the forecast... oh well... those of you who have lived here longer than I know well enough that warm spring weather is still a good four or five months away.

But, oh, how I wish it were warmer. It's only mid-January and I'm already tired of the snow and cold. I'm tired of shoveling and de-icing, bundling up and thawing myself out. I'm tired of putting my head down and walking as fast as I can from my car to work or home so I can step inside and be warm again. And I was doing that very thing just this last week. I was walking head down along the streets of Hyde Park in Chicago, traipsing to class on a sub-zero adventure early in the morning, just trying to reach the warmth of a building, any building. But, for whatever reason, I stopped. I stopped and I looked around at the ice and snow, at the stable trees and barren sidewalk. I turned this way and that and I noticed the world was still and silent. The parked cars were motionless, the streets empty, the whole landscape powdery and frosted. It was strange, beautiful in a way. The world was frozen in place, resting in the cold. Still. Silent.

And I wondered to myself—maybe you have too—what is it that makes us stop and see the world differently? Why, all of a sudden, do we pause and take notice? I had walked those streets in the snow and cold for weeks. What made me stop? I'm not sure I can completely explain it or figure it all out, but I think the *stillness* and *silence* had something to do with it. I may have just then realized how quiet this usually busy part of Chicago was... there were no cars speeding along, no people milling about, no sounds clamoring for my attention... just snow and silence, in the middle of the city. Strange. Beautiful, even. Yet haunting. The world frozen in place, resting in the cold. Still. Silent.

We are led into our story this morning by a stillness and silence. Our story about Samuel begins with the stillness and silence of God. For we read that the “word of the Lord” was

rare in “*those days*” (3:1). Though there was much activity in the land, there was a stillness and silence about it, for God's voice was rare. In fact, “those days” were described in the book of Judges this way: “In *those days* there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (21:25). In addition to the selfishness of the people, the priest Eli had two sons who were wreaking havoc. We are told earlier in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel that “the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people” (2:12). There was a lack of attention for God's ways and so God's voice, in a sense, had withdrawn.

And so we come to Samuel, only 12 years old according to Jewish tradition, sleeping in the temple on a silent, still night. There, in the flickering shadows of dim candle light, a voice calls out: “Samuel, Samuel.” The young boy responds, “Here I am!” Out of the silence, God speaks.

Yet young Samuel does not recognize the voice of God. He says “Here I am,” but not to God, to Eli. He thinks Eli is calling him. So he goes to Eli and Eli tells him to return to the stillness and the silence of the night as he did not call Samuel. Again God's voice returns. Again Samuel responds. Again he goes to Eli. After a third round Eli suspects something and instructs Samuel to listen for the Lord, for it is God who speaks to him. When the Lord breaks the silence again, Samuel responds in a now famous way: “Speak, for your servant is listening!” (v. 10).

This is a beautiful and rich story. But we can easily gloss over it thinking it is only about stopping to hear God. I think we can discover so much more than a simplistic interpretation which urges us to “just stop” and hear God's voice telling us what to do. Yes, attention matters, and this is always an important lesson. We are, too often, not attentive enough to the world around us, to the people next to us, and to our own lives. But I invite you this morning to see how our story speaks of deeper dimensions: silence and response.

I don't think we should “just stop” so we can hear the always talking God. No, there is genuine silence. A sense in which we first don't hear God. But even then we hear something. Even if it is silence. We can *hear* silence. Silence can grab our attention.

I used to play basketball in high school. We trained ourselves to shoot free throws against every kind of imaginable distraction. Most fans try to yell and distract a free-throw shooter with loud noises or harsh words. I remember I used to try and distract an opponent at the free throw line by saying ridiculous stuff like, “Uh, you dropped your pocket,” or, “your socks are untied, man.” Sometimes I just tried really obnoxious and loud breathing patterns. None of them ever really worked. For most players, all the voices clamoring for their attention blend together into a kind of background buzz.

Generally, I found it pretty easy to focus.

Later, in college, when I would go to watch basketball games, I remember strategizing as a spectator with people in the crowd. We were trying to figure out the best way to distract the opposing team's free throw shooter. We decided that we would yell until the moment the player would release the ball. Then, we would all go silent. We got everyone we could, most of the small gymnasium in on it. We screamed, stomped our feet, clapped our hands, all together in a rowdy ruckus. Then, just as the shooter was extending to release the ball... we stopped. Silence. The silence was more powerful than any screaming voice would have been. I could feel the silence. I could hear it. And so did that free-throw shooter.

I want to suggest to you this morning that silence can grip us. It can grip us because it is a vulnerable, fragile reality. It can be shattered by any noise, broken by a single sound. Silence can grip us, I think, because it is a lot like us. To recognize silence is, in a way, to recognize ourselves. We are like silence, we are vulnerable and fragile, we are human. And it is in our humanity, our vulnerability, our fragility, it is in our silence, that God speaks to us. God's voice calls from the silence *to we who are creatures of silence*.

The world was silent for Samuel. The world was fragile and vulnerable and God's voice was missing. The Israelites cared only about themselves, and Eli's sons ignored and abused the priestly ways of God. The silence surrounded Samuel, and it surrounds us too.

Our world is a vulnerable and fragile place. Too often people care for themselves and no one else. God's ways of justice and peace are shunned for political power and greed, for corporate advancement and personal comfort. With tomorrow's celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. day, we are reminded of how our nation and its people were swept up in racism and hate, intolerance and cruelty. We are reminded how the bible and faith-traditions were used to underwrite hurtful human prejudice. We are reminded that witnessing to God's Love can fall on deaf ears and an assassin's bullet.

We are but vulnerable and fragile creatures, prone to distortion and self-deception, always prone to death. We fool ourselves in our thinking and doing, too often doing what we want and forgetting the ways of God... and what is more, we find ourselves hurting and aging, fighting heartache and illness. And it's as though God recedes... As if God becomes, in a way, absent. At times I've felt a haunting void in my own life, and in the swirl of the world around me. Maybe you have too. Our world can have a chaotic silence. A silence we can notice. A silence that can grab our attention.

So I invite you this morning to consider how hearing God means, at the same time,

acknowledging the silence from which God speaks. And, when we acknowledge the vulnerability and fragility of what surrounds us, we can also sense and confess that we ourselves are vulnerable and fragile people—creatures of the silence.

Like Samuel, silence is where we can hear God speaks to us. Even though we are creatures of the silence, the Loving and Forgiving God who speaks from that silence is a God to whom *we can respond*. We may struggle to respond rightly and we may fail to give that voice a name. We might run to people who did not call us. But *we can* respond. And *we can*, in the end, learn who called us. Eli finally offered Samuel a language to respond to God, he gave him a way to respond rightly to the one who called him. We too, I believe, can learn a language to respond rightly to the one who calls us *from the silence by our very name*. That language is one of faith, and its first words are “Speak, for your servant is listening!” May those words be ours. Amen.